

# Influence of John Donne on Tagore's Poetry: A Critical Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to critically understand the relation and influence of English metaphysical poet John Donne (1572-1631) on Rabindranath Tagore's (1861-1941) poems. The research will try to understand the features and philosophy of metaphysical poetry in the seventeenth century in England and how it was reflected in the writing of Tagore between the late 19 and early twenty-century. The article aims to access the role of British Metaphysical poetry in the Bengali writers by the example of Rabindranath Tagore. The study concerns it with the impact of rapidly accelerating change in form, theme, and philosophy of poetry. The empirical study analyses changing the facts of the literary terms, approach, and subject matter of his poetry in Bengali poetry. The paper focuses on significant features of British Metaphysical poetry and Tagore's poetry.

**KEYWORDS:** Rabindranath Tagore, British Metaphysical poetry, John Donne

## INTRODUCTION

The term 'Metaphysical Poets' was coined by Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) to present a loose group of 17<sup>th</sup> century English poets<sup>2</sup>. He introduced these terms in his book *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets (1179-1781)*. Dr. Johnson introduced John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Andrew Marvell, and Henry Vaughan as metaphysical poets. He noted how the poets shared many common characteristics, especially ones of wit and elaborate style, which are entitled as features of metaphysical poems.

The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and, to show their learning was their whole endeavour; but, unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry, they only wrote verses, and, very often, such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear (Johnson).

Metaphysical poets brought a revolutionary change in the era of poetry. They belonged to a conscious attempt to differ from other former Elizabethan poets in form, manner, and literary features. They contain philosophical exploration, colloquial diction, ingenious conceits, irony, and metrically flexible lines in their poetry.

John Donne was a lawyer, poet, satirist, and clergyman.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is the most eminent Bengali renaissance poet, philosopher, critic, composer and educator who dreamt of a harmony of universal humanity among the people of different origin through freedom of mind and spiritual sovereignty (Samiran Kumar Paul, Amar Nath Prasad).

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphysical\\_poets](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphysical_poets))

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Tagore knew about British literature, including 'The School of Donne'. Metaphysical poets deal with two major types of poems- a) Love poems b) Holy poems. Tagore also wrote these two sorts of poems.

**Microcosm:** 'Microcosm' is a prominent feature of metaphysical poems in the school of Donne. Microcosm means Mankind is viewed as the epitome of the whole Universe. (Pathak) 'Micro' means 'very small' and 'cosmos' means 'world'. Therefore, it means a small world. Microcosmic denotes a slight feeling that the world is microscopic and limited compared to human beings. To the imagination of poets, the prominent elements of nature and earth appear very tiny to the poet's mind. This psychological direction is very common to metaphysical writers in the seventeenth century. Tagore's vision was of the beauty, love, and sweetness of the universe (Sastri). It indicates the difference between metaphysical poets to other earlier poets in England. For example, 'Veer Purush (A brave boy)' is the story of a young boy Khoka. In reality, he is weak, but he dreams of bravely rescuing his mother from a gang of dacoits. In 'Our small river (Amader Choto Nadi)', Tagore presented a river where the car can run and cows can walk, etc. Therefore, a giant subject appears small and friendly to Tagore by the use of the microcosm.

**In Medias Res:** In Medias Res means narrating a story from the middle after supposing that, the audiences are aware of past events. It can be said 'Unconventional Openings' (Rajagopalan 33). A Latin phrase denotes "in the midst of things." Hence, the author employs this expression as a common strategy to initiate their stories. One of the unique characteristics of Donne's poetry is In Medias Res. For

example, we can mention the name of 'Song ("Goe, and catch a falling starre..."') where the poet writes,

1. Goe, and catch a falling starre,  
Get with childe a mandrake root,  
Tell me, where all past yeares are,  
Or who cleft the Devil's foot'.
2. For God sake hold your tongue, and let me love.  
(The anonization)

Rabindranath Tagore also uses 'In Medias Res' in his several poems successfully to provoke readers' attention. For example, Tagore starts his poem as;

"I swear to surrender this moment all claim to the ranks of the sensible  
I let go my pride of learning and judge of right and of wrong"<sup>3</sup>

(A magazine of verse)

**Hyperbole:** Hyperbole is a common feature of metaphysical poetry. Hyperbole denotes metaphysical poetry as a 'sense of epic' as metaphysical poets consider themselves essential persons. Hyperbole means an object more significant than it is. John Donne writes, 'Here lies a she sun, and a he moon there; She gives the best light to his sphere';<sup>4</sup>. Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore was highly influenced by John Donne. He quoted verses from John Donne in his novel '*Shasher Kobita/ Last Poem*'. John Donne quotes, 'She's all states, and all princes, I, Nothing else is'<sup>5</sup>. Tagore also glorifies his beloved with hyperbole, '*The evening light is not yours, my path burned in the darkness. Bees thirsty behind the beam, At the end of the day, in your heart, the exhausted walker is going to abstract nectar.*'<sup>6</sup>

#### Presentation of Love:

Through his poetry, Donne projects his theory of love in a very unique way. After the perusal of his poetry and thematic analysis of his poems – especially love poems, we can conclude that Donne was not only a poet but also a great theorist; but his theory is implicitly presented in his poetry. It incorporates variegated forms of love. (Ahmad)

Rabindranath Tagore illustrates physical love with the touch of metaphysical philosophy. Physical love is depicted vividly by both Donne and Tagore. Love without a physical relationship cannot last long. Love matures by 'sex' in metaphysical poems. As John Donne says, 'Love's mysteries in souls do grow, and yet the body is his book'. Another he writes, 'More than kisses, letters mingle souls.' Rabindranath Tagore also gives importance to physical love in his early works including '*kori o komol*'. Tagore writes, 'Every part of my body is crying for the touch of your every region of your body. The union of life claims physical union.' In '*Europe Porbaser Jaatri*', Tagore admires the beauty of nakedness. Love of metaphysical poets is found in Buddhadeva Bose (1908–1974)'s '*Rat Vore Bristi* (1967)'. Bose writes, 'Love is the body - the beginning, the end, all those bodies. Love is organic, love is sexual, and there is nothing to love if there is no human body.' Donne also writes alike, 'To be no part of

any human body is to be nothing'<sup>7</sup>. However, Tagore's love is not barbaric. Tagore considered his beloved as a sexual partner but gives the highest respected place called 'Debi/ Goddess'.

'Cynicism is a quality that stands out prominently in the erotic verse of the metaphysical' (Rajagopalan 33). The lady is honored with full homage and perfection and the lover is willingly sitting at the foot of the lady. The lady is glorified for their beauty and physical appeal. The lover admires and places his lady as unattainable perfection. The lover agrees to sigh and groan at the feet of his lady in Donne's poetry. For example, Donne says,

1. z'She's all states, and all princes, I,  
Nothing else is.  
Princes do but play us; compared to this,  
All honor's mimic, all wealth alchemy' (The Sun Rising).
2. I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,  
But that I would not lose her sight so long;  
If her eyes have not blinded thine,  
Look, and tomorrow late, tell me,  
Whether both th' Indias of spice and mine. (The Sun Rising)

Metaphysical poetry is not confined to the structure. It lies on a specific poetic philosophy associated with life. In Donne's poetry, fornication and adultery become a common trend. Men make love with women as sexual partners, not a wife. There is no sense of guilt for fornication and adultery in Donne's poetry. They are not aware of social taboos and restrictions about sex. By nature, sexual liberalism is a regular feature in metaphysical poetry. Worship of the body appears a significant issue to metaphysical poets. In 'The Flea', Donne expressed that the belly of a flea is the marriage bed them.

Rabindranath Tagore also expressed the metaphysical idea of fornication and adultery in his novel. For instance, Tagore depicted 'love beyond marriage' in his novel '*Shasher Kabita*'. Readers can compare the metaphysical fornication of Donne in Tagore's novel. The social reality and practice of adultery were illustrated in both Donne and Tagore.

#### Devotion to God:

Most of the metaphysical poets are both poets and preachers. Therefore, devotion to God becomes a unique feature in their works. Both John Donne and Rabindranath Tagore are devotional poets alike. Probably their source of devotion may be different, but they present God in the same way. 'Contemplative piety, or the intercourse between God and the human soul, cannot be poetical. A man admitted to implore the mercy of his Creator and plead the merits of his Redeemer is already in a higher state than poetry can confer' (Johnson, Religious Poetry, The Lives of the Poets). Tagore also looks for an infinite and mystic relationship between God and men in his works. The current worry and suffering lead men to God for salvation and pity. The title '*Gitanjali*' or 'Song of Offerings' denotes itself reminiscent of '*Bhakti*' (Devotion) tradition. Tagore devotes to God says, "In one salutation to thee, my God, let all my senses spread out and touch this world at thy feet. (Das)"

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>

<sup>4</sup> The Complete English Poems by John Donne

<sup>5</sup> The Sun Rising by John Donne

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.tagoreweb.in/Render/ShowContent.aspx?ct=Songs&bi=72EE92F5-BE50-4207-9E6E-0F7410664DA3&ti=72EE92F5-BE52-4857-AE6E-0F7410664DA3&ch=1>

<sup>7</sup> John Donne (c. 1572-1631), British divine, metaphysical poet. letter, Sept. 1608, to Sir Henry Goodyer. Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, ed. John Hayward (1929).

'The poems in Song Offerings abound with devotional messages and ethereal delight and the ecstasy that vibrate through the poems in Song Offerings gushes out with a profound love for God, nature and mankind.' (Chowdhury). Tagore's God is a redeemer like poet Donne's God in 'Batter My Heart (1633)'. Both poets ask God for battering their heart to get it reshaped by Lord. It provokes a struggle to purify oneself to close to God. Self-realization and self-purification present in their poems mainly. 'Donne's 'Batter My Heart' shows the poet involved in a deep-rooted and desperate struggle with his own soul. He almost seems to doubt whether God exists at all, and the power of the diction and imagery is indicative of serious turmoil' (Mackean). In 'Batter My Heart', Donne begs to God to restore his soul. He asks God to secure his eternal salvation and freedom. He confesses as he has engaged with the enemy. In this poem, the poet portrays a God-loving one who has deviated from the path of God and has gone the devil's way. The poet here appeals to the great God, that he should remove all the insidiousness and abyss within him by hurting. The evil devil has taken the heart of the poet; the poet wants to free himself from this devil. The poet thinks that all the ominous aspects will escape when he touches the great God. Auspicious aspects will take place in the poet's heart. The poet eagerly sought God's intervention. The poet thinks his heart is like a city that has been possessed by an evil devil. Similarly, to Rabindranath Tagore, the example of heavenly love contained in the '*Gitanjali*' (Song of Offerings), however, is not rare in Western literature. This impulse to associate creation with the Creator is found in Western literature and philosophy. What differentiates Rabindranath's lyrics is that he expresses his love for the widow through the love of humanity in his death. However, in the '*Vaisnava*' verses composed in the Middle Ages, such as '*Vidyapati*' or '*Jayadeva*', the imposition of narcissism on the heavenly love developed as a traditional poem. Rabindranath, who spoke with the Creator in all these terms, sought his compassion, sought his unconditional love, wanted the power to wake up, which was needed by the underprivileged Indians. "You will help me not to have more power/prayer with my power". Even in songs that are bound by nature, there is a subtle creator present. The intense consciousness of the intense, harmonious desire of union with '*Paramatma*' (God) - the consciousness that vibrates in the language of a unique statement, is rooted in an irresistible rhythm. Tagore presents the love of a bride and her lover. The bride is the symbol of the poet himself and his lover is the Almighty God' (Shukla). He longs for the great God; the only great God can remove his heart from all the dirty aspects of the city. The poet always remembers that the great God is the controller of all the human senses and the great God, is the controller of human beings. The poet asks God to place all his senses in the right direction. Tagore's method of God's realization is humanistic as he attributes humanity to God and divinity to man (Manjula 65). "My song has put off her adornments. She has no pride of dress and decoration.... Like a flute of reed for thee to fill with music."<sup>8</sup> Empty and destitute life of a man is compared with 'Frail Vessel' by Tagore<sup>9</sup>. Tagore writes, "Thou has made me endless; such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life." 'Humanity and divinity, according to Tagore, do

not belong to two different orders but are only the aspects of the same reality (Manjula 65). Tagore prays, 'O now beneath your feet's dust let, my head kneel on the ground. O you who know heart's deeper power make my heart flower. In danger save me — such a prayer is not of my heart's choosing but that I stay free from fear in danger. When life is all wrung out and dry in an impulse of kindness, come.'<sup>10</sup> Both Tagore and Donne asserted that showing weakness towards God is a way of getting Strength. 'Realizing our weaknesses may make us miserable, but this realization also points to an ideal of perfection. (Gaur 27)'. God is considered ideal perfection to both Donne and Tagore.

### Metaphysical Wit / Display of scholarship:

'The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour; but, unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry they only wrote verses, and very often such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear; for the modulation was so imperfect, that they were only found to be verses by counting the syllables. (Johnson, Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets)'

Metaphysical wit denotes an intellectual ability to use verbal dexterity and skill and an imagination that could bring quite different ideas and images together in an overall unity. Poets deliver the very reality of life by metaphysical wit. The poet uses wit to interpret the complexity and depth of the earthly issue. 'Donne's poetry is overloaded with fantastic comparisons, complicated similes and metaphors drawn from the most remote and unfamiliar sources' (Chaudhary 229). For example, Donne compares the relation between two lovers with 'a pair of compasses' in his poem, 'A Valediction forbidding Mourning'. Donne says, 'If they be they are two so, As stiff twin compasses are two, Thy soul the fixed foot, makes no show, to move, but doth, if the other do'. Donne shows his intellectual and philosophical analysis of the love and affair of two lovers by metaphysical wit. Comparison of lovers with compasses is erudite and witty but philosophical and reflective with concentrative observation. Correspondingly, Tagore too uses metaphysical wit or conceit in his several poems. In 'Flute Music', Tagore compares 'Emperor Akbar' with a very common poor folk 'Haripada the clerk'. Initially, it is mind striking and argumentative but with deep concentration, readers will find the similarity of both of them in life sketch. The poem finally contains plenty of argumentation to prove what the poet wants to prove. Tagore says, 'And I feel that nothing distinguishes Haripada the clerk, From Emperor Akbar. Torn umbrella and royal parasol merge, Rise on the sad music of a flute towards one heaven'. Because of the fact, "our sweetest songs are those which tell us the saddest thought."<sup>11</sup> The raag of Kantababu accentuates the pain of Haripada, which at times Akbar might also have felt listening to music. The sad music unites their heaven, being the pleasure of their pain. Thus, 'Concentration is one of the major features of metaphysical poetry. (Rajagopalan 30)'. The poem illustrates the life and deeds of a poor clerk called Haripada who lives in the alley of a milkman. His living room is dark, untidy, and unsanitary, problematic for human inhabitation. Apart from the clerk, a lizard holds a share of the room.

<sup>8</sup> Rabindra Nath Tagore, Rabindra Rachnawali – Gitanjali, Rupa & co. 7/16 Ansari Road Daryaganj, New Delhi, 2009, Page – 05

<sup>9</sup> Gitanjali

<sup>10</sup> Samir K. Gupta, Spirituality in Tagore's Gitanjali, in Roma Dutta • Clinton Seely (Ed.), Celebrating Tagore (New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Limited, 2009), 182.

<sup>11</sup> To a Skylark by Percy Bysshe Shelley



Tagore says the lizard is another member of the Haripada family. Generally, a lizard is not regarded as a family member of a human family, but readers can understand the very reality of his miserable lonely life with deep concentration. Tagore says, 'Another creature apart from me lives in my room, For the same rent; A lizard. There's one difference between him and me: He doesn't go hungry. Metaphysical conceit or wits are regarded as 'expanded epigram' (Rajagopalan 30). Consequently, 'All comparisons discover likeness in things unlike, comparison becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness. (Gardner)'. Dr. Johnson called metaphysical conceit, 'heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together. Metaphysical wit uses conceit as a metaphysical device. According to Garden (1972), conceit is the second most important characteristic of metaphysical poems in the seventeenth century. Far-fetched image means "Images taken from the field of knowledge, science, agriculture, geography, history, astronomy, chemistry, engineering, geometry, mathematics, biology, medical, etc.". 'A conceit is a far-fetched image where two dissimilar things are compared to each other and the poet is very striking manner persuades us of the justness of this comparison' (Habeeb 2). Tagore is not less vigor and grandeur using far-fetched images than poetry written by English metaphysical poets like John Donne. T.S. Eliot describes this scholarship as, 'A bracelet of bright hair about the bone'<sup>12</sup>.

### The Dynamic Images of Death:

In John Donne's poetry, death has a dynamic state and the static state. In this section, the author of the thesis emphasized the dynamic state of the death (Zhang Li, Wang Ce). Donne's religious poems are entitled in 'Holy Sonnet'. His sonnet claims the meaning of death. It also provokes the invocation of God. Rabindranath Tagore presented 'death' as a significant theme in his works. Like metaphysical poet John Donne, Tagore also portrays death as a trivial object. To both of them, death is nothing but salvation to eternal emancipation. Tagore writes, 'Death is not extinguishing the light; it is only putting out the lamp because the dawn has come'<sup>13</sup>. Donne also considers death as emancipation, 'Be thine own palace, or the world's thy jail. And in the world's sea, do not like cork sleep, Upon the water's face; nor in the dee; Sink like a lead without a line; but as Fishes glide, leaving no print where they pass; Nor making sound, so closely thy course go.'<sup>14</sup> This attitude towards death is also reminiscent of Tagore's attitude in his poem, 'O thou the last fulfillment of life, Death, my death, come and whisper to me!'

**Conclusion:** Hence, the paper indicates the influence of British metaphysical poet John Donne on Bengal poet Rabindranath Tagore vividly. The essence of metaphysical poems is found in Tagore's poetry with colorful presentation. At present, metaphysical poetry cannot be defined as some poetic features rather a philosophical aspect. The idea of metaphysical poetry inspires many Bengali writers the way to the world. It makes a new perspective in the thoughts of Bengali writers.

<sup>12</sup> The Metaphysical Poets (1921)

<sup>13</sup> Think of an Elephant: Combining Science and Spirituality for a Better Life; By, Paul Bailey Author

<sup>14</sup> To Sir Henry Wotton by John Donne.

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